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The Poetic: Brief Reflections on a Contradiction

Initial Sparrings

The poetic is oxymoronic, ambivalent, shape-changing. Especially since Wordsworth, the poetic is the unpoetic; it is also language on and from the heights. It is personal; it is impersonal. It is the revelation of personal feeling; it is language speaking through an accidental medium. It is known as a shock, an attack on the pre-established; it is the ghost of immemorial traditions invading the shallow present. It is touchstones:

He was a lover of the good old school,
Who still become more constant as they cool.
(Byron)

Always I long to creep
Into some still cavern deep,
There to weep, and weep, and weep
My whole soul out to thee.
(Tennyson)

It was the thought that they thought
they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked.
(Berryman)

Disillusion and illusion are inextricable in these examples, and in all that makes up 'the poetic'. Always the poetic announces: 'That was happiness; this is loss; then was intensity; now is irony and dejection'. Always the poetic says in an undertone: 'There was pain; here is the useless, possibly enduring compensation of words'. And always the poetic seeks to transcend, is fated to seek to transcend, despite the snarling objections of materialists; it always eyes a Utopian heaven; even if squinting slightly, even if fervently or wryly denying the imperative to do so, it cannot not aspire

towards a Paradiso of circling lights and inexpressible tropes. This is why Dante and Shelley are masters in the realms of the poetic.

At the same time, the poetic has nothing to do with touchstones, wrenched from context, over-localised and distortedly focalised.

Certainly the poetic catches us off-guard, enhances the affective, yet questions sentimentality and pseudo-profundity. Our need for it is analogous to our need for our love; without it we are only partly alive; with it we realise we were only partly living.

Above all the poetic is technique; in certain moods (the poet struggling with a half-decent piece), the poetic is nothing but technique, chopping out an extra syllable or two, recrafting a laboured phrase, replacing a Latinate word with one that has tang and salt; getting it right, or at least getting it slightly less wrong.

Above all the poetic outthinks matters of technique; it outwits precision, analysis; it's a question of depth of feeling and thought.

The poetic is personal

Without the personal voice, the personal inflection, the personal relationship with the language, what's the point? The poetic demands of its devotees a commitment to the value of the personal, a fierce relish of the singular nature of self and others, an attachment to uniqueness's DNA codes, specific memories, a readiness to breach conventions of tact and good manners, a truth-telling that may border on the exhibitionist, an authenticity that is nearly always going to hurt someone. Speaking for myself, I only really admire poets when I feel they tell me some irreducible truth about who they are or long to be: Shelley at the start of the final section of 'Ode to the West Wind': 'Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is'; Spender at the close of

‘Moving through the silent crowd’’: ‘I’m haunted by these images / I’m haunted by their emptiness’.

The poetic is impersonal

Of course, the personal in poetry is not the same thing as the personal in ordinary speech. Shelley and Spender have been transfigured into untrue, greater versions of their everyday selves. ‘All that is personal soon rots’, says the finest of lyric poets (Yeats). The personal is tedious, egotistical; it is merely the point of departure, the airfield from which the jet of the poetic launches itself. Who cares – in poetry – about another person’s experiences simply because they are that other person’s experiences? For the telling of experiences to become poetic they need to undergo a change into language and form. All poets know that a poem will demand that an experiential detail has to be dropped or fudged because of the demands imposed by the benign tyranny of metre, rhyme, sound, or structure. The poetic is impersonal or transpersonal or interpersonal because it has no existence until it is embodied in language, a shared possession. I cannot have sovereign control over the word *I* since *I* is only a word that names a position that any *I* can occupy. All *Is* in achieved poems are simultaneously first-person plurals. ‘It is WE who are Hamlet’, says Hazlitt; and we are the Wordsworth who writes, ‘To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that often lie too deep for tears’. We are so because of ‘the human heart by which we live’. Speaking for myself, I admire those moments in poetry most when individuality passes into something beyond itself: ‘And *we* are here as on a darkling plain’ at the end of Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ is an example, when the newly married couple merge into types of Victorian culture. Again, Keats’s most personal poem, the

poem in which his most intense feelings about love and poetry are distilled, is an impersonal ballad: ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’.

Interim Conclusions

The poetic is the stubby pencil poised above the bare half-page of the old notebook full of a dozen false starts; it is the fingers ready to tap out some half-thought glimpse of a feeling into a new file, which may develop new titles, be transferred from one slow-running laptop to another, be forgotten for several years, be printed out, reworked, retyped, forgotten again – and occasionally find itself in print, with luck without a typo (all palaces turn into places, all places into palaces). The poetic is the exhausted, late-night address to something that has niggled away at consciousness for too long. The poetic is what awaits the reader of Baudelaire in ‘Le Cygne’, in which Paris changes but the poet’s melancholy never changes – and yet he is able to connect his feelings of exile with that of many others. The poetic is ...